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ScotPID – A model of collaboration

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Abstract

ScotPID is a national personal development initiative in Scotland, with thirteen higher education institutions taking part in the development of case studies which enhance personal development planning for students. As a model of collaboration, ScotPID involves all stakeholders: each core project group is composed of an academic, IT support manager, careers service adviser and undergraduate student, with support from QAA Scotland. The case study is developed by the contribution of all of the members of the team. The strength of the ScotPID collaboration is the varied background of the team members. However, collaboration *between* the ScotPID teams should also be encouraged, to strengthen the inter-institutional approach further.

Summary

This paper describes the development of an educational case study, and how contribution of stakeholders from a range of backgrounds within the Scottish Higher Education results in a more rounded publication.

Introduction

“To go fast, go alone. To go farther, go together”

(African proverb, cited in (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009))

Collaboration is a productive means by which to develop and create new ideas, harness a wide range of expertise and maximise resources. In the context of higher education, there are many examples; between higher and further education to promote e-learning (Connolly, C. Jones, & N. Jones, 2007), in order to improve practice (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009) and in policy and quality assurance matters (Kehm, 2010). Despite encouraging departments and institutions to collaborate, 50% of these collaborations are destined to failure (Kezar, 2005). Kezar outlines a three stage process which encourages success of collaborations: **Stage 1** is characterised by identifying the need for collaboration, and the initiation of network building. **Stage 2** emphasises commitment of senior management to support collaborations and networks, and **Stage 3** builds upon the two previous stages by building on established networks to provide sustainability.

Many collaborations in higher education are within departments, which are supported from within the institution or between institutions. At a national level, for example, in the UK, there is the National Teaching Fellows Scheme (“National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) - Higher Education Academy,” n.d.) which recognises individuals who have made a substantial contribution to teaching and learning in higher education, and in addition, allows NTF partnerships to bid for substantial funding to support cross-institutional collaborations (“NTFS Projects Funded in 2010,” n.d.). QAA Scotland also supports higher education in Scotland with its Enhancement Themes programme (“Enhancement Themes,” n.d.) and other development work. The Enhancement Themes are led by academics from all Scottish higher education institutions, and aim to support and enhance learning and teaching strategy and practice across the sector.

The support of collaborations within higher education is important in the process of community-building. At the heart of education is the notion of the community of practice, as proposed by Wenger (1998, p73). Wenger outlines participation in a community as necessary for growth and learning. He proposes three dimensions of community: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire. As with Kezar's proposal, Wenger also articulates the importance of identifying the need for collaboration, and the involvement of stakeholders in achieving a common goal as necessary for the success of the formation of a community of practice.

ScotPID collaboration

ScotPID ("Academy Scotland - Professional Development Planning (PDP)," n.d.) is a national initiative supported by the Higher Education Academy, QAA Scotland, and the Centre for Recording Achievement. Thirteen institutions are involved in the development of case studies promoting and enhancing personal development planning for students. Following successful bids, the thirteen project teams met in Edinburgh for an introductory meeting to discuss each of the partner projects, and PDP in general. This meeting was a chance for groups to offer suggestions to one another where difficulties or problems have arisen. The group from the University of Glasgow have proposed a unique approach to personal development planning (PDP). In contrast to the development of e-portfolios, which is successful in vocational courses, such as medicine, nursing and teaching, the University of Glasgow ScotPID group have taken the approach of using reflective writing (Moon, 2003) for summative assessment in a way which encourages self-reflection, which leads to critical thinking and, ultimately, developmental planning (Butler, Tatner, & Tierney, 2010). Students use the online PDP tool Mahara ("Open source e-portfolio and social networking software - Mahara ePortfolio System," n.d.) to write online reflective diaries as part of their summative coursework. Students are encouraged to share their diaries with other members of the class to

facilitate peer support and collaborative learning. In addition, students are given tutor support, and for bioscience students reflective writing is tackled within a session in which they explore Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) (which will be developed in greater detail in a workshop during this conference (Tierney, 2011)). The diaries move PDP from a task-oriented approach to an intellectual approach, in which students integrate ideas and synthesis new knowledge, and draw upon one another's expertise. Based on an ongoing study, the ScotPID case study examines how students in Bioscience and Central & East European Studies benefit from the summative assessment task, the development of reflection and critical thinking, and the use of technology to support it. Using reflective writing as part of a course gives PDP the focus that is often missing from non-vocational PDP projects.

In the development of the case study, the composition of the project team is important, and has been duplicated for every ScotPID project: each member of the team, academic, IT support manager, Careers Service Adviser, student and QAA Scotland support co-ordinator ensures that the case study is considered from the point of view of all stakeholders, and the end result is a well-rounded, transferable piece of best practice. Not only is technology part of the case study; the group co-ordinates the project through Sharepoint ("Productivity & collaboration - Microsoft UK Medium Business Centre," n.d.), allowing individual members to share and collaborate on case study documentation, literature reviews, and data collected.

Method

The members of the reflective diary case study project group were asked to reflect on a number of questions (Appendix 1). Responses were returned from all members of the team. The themes that arose from the responses to those questions are presented in this paper. Although the sample size is small (n=5) there was agreement in the responses from each of the project team members which allowed three themes to be identified. The responses of the student member of the team have been dealt with separately. The reasoning behind this is that,

in compiling the responses of the group, it emerged that there were assumptions on the part of both staff and students as to their respective roles, which the authors believe have a wider significance as to how staff and students perceive one another's roles.

Findings

From the reflections of the team members, three positive themes emerged: the expertise that each of the group members brought to the team; the importance of collaboration and dissemination. Evidence of these three themes will be dealt with in turn. In addition, a fourth theme, that of reservations, will also be examined. Finally, as stated above, the student member's comments, under each of the themes, have been addressed.

Team Members' Expertise

Expertise and previous experience of the members of the team were identified by all respondents, in differing contexts. Respondents identified previous experience of working with team members, building on previous work done by members of the team, background in the theoretical underpinning and rationale for the project, evidence gathered to support the case study, and individuals working to their strengths.

"I knew all of the people involved and had previously worked directly with all of them."

"It made sense to build on existing internal research and widen the potential transferability of this project to other non-vocational courses."

"... not only had practical experience but a great understanding of the theoretical knowledge in this area."

"I bring a perspective that's wider than the institution and knowledge about how other institutions work – and that's what I love to do – see how institutions work."

Importance of Collaboration

All staff respondents recognised, and commented on the significance of collaboration. This manifested itself at various levels: at a macro level, with the collaboration between national organisations and institutions, as a model of engagement within an institutional setting, collaboration between disciplines and at an individual level between staff from different backgrounds, and between staff and students. Emphasis was placed on allowing the team members to work to their strengths. Respondents also commented on the importance of communication, how conversation with others within the team was important in terms of creativity, as a means to pool resources, and avoid duplication of effort. Less explicit was recognition of collaboration between ScotPID teams, although it was acknowledged by one of the team members.

“[Collaborations like this are] extremely useful as they encourage staff from across an institution and the sector to engage in demonstration and communication of useful project outputs. Furthermore the day sessions allow for sector sharing during projects rather than at the end.”

“I think collaborations are more creative and fruitful, than someone trying to work on their own. In particular, with educational collaborations, it is particularly creative when members of the group come from different disciplinary backgrounds...Everyone in the group contributes something unique to the end product.”

“The ScotPID model was devised to move away from a model of engagement that involved participants having to leave their institutions to engage in generic discussions, toward one that would support practice in context, through institutional projects.”

“Sector activities I have been involved in have provided a number of opportunities for collaboration and discussion that have been of great value, both to the institution... and also my own continuing personal development.”

Dissemination

The third theme to emerge from the team's reflections was that of the importance of dissemination. This was articulated as the promotion of innovative examples of teaching coming from the institution, sector-wide dissemination of good practice, widening the transferability of the project, and promotion of discussion of innovative practice across a range of networks.

"It's important to publicise exemplars of innovative teaching...teachers need to start publicising their good practice in the way that research is publicised."

"what will be most useful is how this will be used to prompt dissemination with new networks e.g. Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching (TELT)."

"Effective dissemination is crucial to maximising the usefulness of the project outputs, and therefore the success of the ScotPID project aims."

"Those who read the case studies can then relate that learning to their own experiences and perhaps change their practice."

Reservations

Each of the female staff respondents expressed reservations. However, these were not towards the ScotPID project, the case study or the team. Reservations expressed were more personal, in that the respondents commented on having to prioritise work to fit the case study into their working day and questioning their skills and abilities.

"I was a little nervous about how useful I would be to project teams – were my facilitation skills up to it?"

"It can be pretty difficult sometimes fitting something like this around full time teaching. We'll get started again and finish the case study pretty soon."

"I had never been involved in a project quite like this before, so was not sure what to expect."

Student perspective

The student member of the team was also aware of previous work, having been interviewed on their use of reflective diaries in the context of their course in Central & East European Studies. Having a student collaborate on an educational project is of great benefit to the project as they can contribute how it actually feels to take part in the practice. The student's views are outlined below:

Team Members' Expertise

"I was keen to be part of [the] project as I was eager to share my experiences with others and was intrigued by the concept of collaboration itself and thought I could provide valuable contributions as a student but also learn a lot from the experience."

The student's past experience in the initial phase of the diary investigation gave her a taste for more participation. This is significant, as one of the aims of QAA Scotland, with its Enhancement Themes series, is to offer students a realistic and authentic research experience during their undergraduate years. By involving students in the development of their own learning, universities can achieve this aim.

Importance of collaboration

"I was already aware of the benefits of such collaborations... However, initially it did surprise me that these kind of 'development programmes' happened at a university level and were aimed at benefitting the student learning experience – as a student you tend to presume that teaching staff just write the lectures and present them without giving much thought to our learning experience, I hadn't realised until I became involved in the project just how much effort and thought is put in by staff, throughout the numerous universities in Scotland, to improve the teaching and learning experience and the different ways these ideas are manifested."

This passage from the reflections of the student highlights some of the assumptions that are being made – as staff, we assume that students know and appreciate about the effort made to improve their learning opportunities. However, from this student’s perception of the undergraduate experience, this is not being passed on to students.

Dissemination

“pulling together of experiences and knowledge is essential in developing learning...for the contemporary world and projects such as this highlight the commitment that universities make to ensuring their teaching methods respond to the changing needs of students, which is something that the vast majority of students do not realise is occurring.”

Although in this passage, the student does not explicitly mention dissemination, the message may be implied: that there is a necessity to disseminate good practice to students, as well as staff, and to involve students in the development of their own learning, that students and staff should be encouraged to work in partnership to better understand one another’s aims.

ScotPID – the bigger picture

The institutional staff members of the team were focused on the delivery and benefits of the reflective diary case study. None mentioned the other partner teams in the project. The QAA Scotland contact, because of her remit, mentioned the benefits of the project as a whole, but again, did not talk about collaboration between ScotPID groups themselves.

“I think that collaborations between national agencies and institutions are very valuable. Both can learn from each other; the chance for all to view different perspectives on the same issue is invaluable.”

The ScotPID model is complex, as can be seen from the views of the members. The collaboration exists between the members of the team, but also potentially exists at other levels: building networks between institutional project groups, strengthening the learning

partnerships between staff and students, and working at a national level to disseminate good practice.

Discussion

Having looked at the reflections of the members of the Glasgow ScotPID team, elements of Phase 1 of Kezar's (2005) process of successful collaboration are being fulfilled. It is also clear that the project team is pulling together as a community of practice through shared goals and a common enterprise. In drawing together a group with diverse interests and expertise, which each of the individuals acknowledges, a network is being built. This network is significant in a number of ways. Each of the project team members comes from a specific background and has expertise which enhances the project. The members of the group have worked with one another at different times, and it is a natural progression to bring them together on a project. The QAA Scotland contact has an overview of the Scottish higher education sector as a whole, and can act as a conduit to disseminate innovative practice at a national level. The Learning Technology manager has expertise in the benefits of online technology and its implementation, and can also champion the dissemination of the project within the institution, and encourage other projects. The PDP officer has national contacts within the PDP sector of higher education in Scotland, can offer support and advice in developing the case study, and can work with the Learning Technology manager in dissemination at an institutional level. The academic has experience of learning and teaching developments, of developing innovative uses for technology and has knowledge of the literature that supports the development of learning for students. The student's contribution comes from active participation in the project itself and the articulation of the benefits of online collaboration diary writing from her own perspective. The reflections of the project team on the project itself are very much concentrated on the team and the reflective diary case study. Although ScotPID is mentioned in dissemination of the case study, only the QAA

Scotland contact specifically mentioned the interaction between national agencies and institutions, and how the groups could potentially support one another and share their expertise. The QAA Scotland contact also reflected on the benefits of the project in terms of institutions and national agencies working together and sharing best practice. This is not a surprising finding, as the viewpoint of the QAA Scotland contact is to look at the sector as a whole; the other members of the team view the institution as the ‘unit of currency’.

Recommendations

The response of the team members to the ScotPID project was positive. It appears a strength of the programme that staff and students have some knowledge of one another’s work prior to the project, and can build on one another’s strengths as the project progresses. Each of the team members can identify with the ScotPID project, as they have a stake in its completion. However, in order for this model to be sustainable, it requires support from senior management within institutions and the establishment of a robust network, fulfilling Stages 2 & 3 of Kezar’s (2005) collaboration model. The support may be sought once the thirteen case studies have been completed, providing evidence of the success of the collaborative approach. One area that has not been exploited fully is collaboration between project teams. ScotPID as a whole is building a resource of PDP case studies. Each of these takes a novel approach but there are commonalities to all of the projects: the make-up of the group, barriers and enablers to implementation, support at departmental and institutional level. As this is an examination of one of the thirteen ScotPID partnerships, it would be valuable to complete a further study of the other twelve teams involved in the project in order to find the common themes that run through ScotPID and contribute to its success. ScotPID as a model offers many opportunities to improve the student experience, and its strength lies in the growing network of individuals with wide and varied experience, who can contribute their expertise to the project.

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Appendix 1

Reflective questions

1. Your first contact with ScotPID – how did you hear about it?
2. What did you think about joining the project team?
3. What strengths do you bring to the ScotPID team?
4. What do you see as the most useful outcomes of the case study?
5. What value do you see in collaborations of this kind?